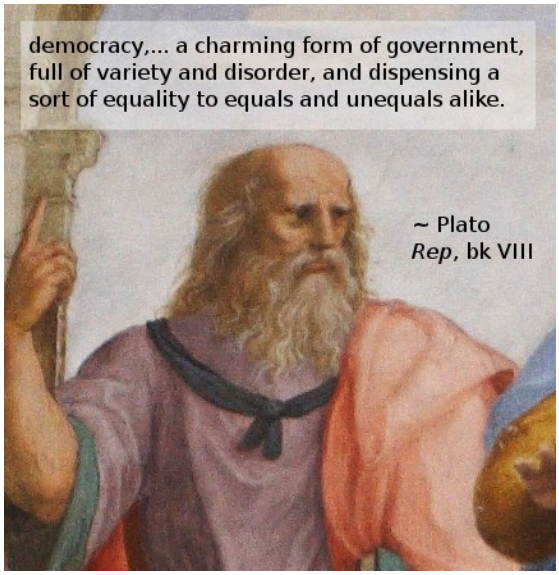
Plato's *Republic*


democracy,... a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.
~ Plato
Rep, bk VIII

Alfred North Whitehead famously said all Western philosophy since Plato wrote has been footnotes to Plato. Many agree with him. Plato's *Republic* is a 2500 year-old classic because it raises questions and suggests answers that are as relevant now as they were then. Current events in the U.S. illustrate.

The central question of the long dialogue is "what is justice?"

Plato asked how best civilized societies ought to organize themselves. Some notion of justice or fairness must have something to do with it, he figured. To get very far with his inquiry, he needed to ask what is "justice"? Near the start of the dialogue the character Thrasymachus offers a simple, straightforward answer:

Justice is obedience to laws.

Who makes the laws?

Those empowered to make them.

What empowers them?

Power does, obviously.

Who has the power?

The stronger.

How does one get to be stronger?

Ultimately, by having and using the ability to control what others do.

How does that come about?

At the level of societies, it means having or acquiring substantial resources.

How does that work?

With more resources than others, you can make the others needy relative to you.

You mean by being or getting rich relative to these others?

Yes.

One can't be or get rich just by being just, right?

Absolutely, not. Justice is what happens when you obey the laws. It is a product, an outcome. It is what happens *after* you obey the laws. Obedience to the laws serves the interest of those with the strength to make them. The laws are made by those empowered to do so. Those empowered to do so are empowered by their relative strength to force outcomes. Strength, of course, comes about by having the resources to acquire it. Therefore, it comes down to amassing resources. In other words, being or getting rich.

This is the order of things. Only in this way can there be peace and harmony in society. Obey the resourceful.

In short, might makes right and wealth makes might.

…

Plato did not like this answer... for some reason. He really didn't want to believe that might was all there was to justice.

He didn't actually have a quarrel with wealth per se. After all, he was among the privileged class himself. (Having found time to worry yourself over "philosophy" means you have enough to eat and are not too afraid you won't tomorrow.) But it is hard to fathom what could have troubled Plato if he didn't see something problematic about wealth. Wealth is good, surely. Enough is... But that it is distributed to *forestall envy* is also important; it turns out critically important to social *harmony*. In the end, harmony is what he is going to show the point of justice is… or *ought* to be.

But it is harder than one might think to convince people of this because it clashes with more immediate observations: people with resources have *always* commanded power. If you don't like Thrasymachus' glib but realist answer (and if you don't want to get too dreamy), you have your work cut out for you. Plato spends the whole rest of the dialogue finding fault with Thrasymachus' answer. In the course of his inquiry and critique, Plato develops some ideas still current today, most notably, the doctrine of "separation of powers."[1] We are going to look closely at those ideas to see how they fit together and if they still apply...

Plato's ideal state

There are three principle requirements, according to Plato, for a just state:

1. This is not quite the "separation of powers" attempted by the framers of the U. S. Constitution, for example. Theirs was a separation of specifically *political* powers: legislative, judicial and executive. But when all these powers are invested in the same *economic* class, as has always been the case in the U.S., though more than ever today, there is a failure of *true* separation of powers. It ceases to be a case of foxes guarding the hen house, but *which* foxes. It is a timocracy poised for outright plutocracy. The relevant wealth inequality becomes that between the *poor-rich* and *rich-rich*, no one else matters. See "2024 election postmortem: why Trump won," pp. 2-3

1. The radical *separation* of economic from political power.

2. *Competence*: “mind your own business” in the positive sense of striving for excellence in what you do, something only possible with the...

3. Proper *motivation*: you cannot be sustainably competent in an activity that you do not in some way enjoy, take some pleasure in. We enjoy different activities or vocations. The things we enjoy are things we are, at least, somewhat *good at*.[2] Finding out what we are *good at* is basic to a proper education. Exposing future citizens, the young, to opportunities for discovering what they are suited for, what their aptitude is, what they would enjoy *and* be competent doing is the essential function of an education. And those in charge of this education, like everyone else, must also have previously discovered that they are suited to an educator’s role, that is to say, they find their vocation as educators fulfilling.

An assumption behind Plato’s “mind your own business” imperative is that very few of us are really good at very distinct vocations, a fallout of which is that mobility of vocation should not be encouraged. A multiplicity of competences in the same person cannot be ruled out, but specialization must, nevertheless, be encouraged in the interest of competence because it is rare for one person to excel at *fundamentally* unrelated things such as making money and making decisions that foster social harmony. Competence, everyone doing what they are good at, will conduce to cohesive social harmony. Social harmony describes what a just society looks like, according to Plato.

Of course, each of us may have different basic interests and be drawn to many different vocations which is good. We need such diversity *in different people*. The vocations that are most fundamentally distinct from each other, and, because of their distinctness, *exclude* each other, Plato saw as characterized by:

- allegiance to material wealth and comfort (**the appetitive class:** those who make things, offer services, or deal in these: plumbers, candlestick makers, software engineers, “...lawyers and doctors and such” – the sort mamas should encourage their babies to be.)

- allegiance to the protection of order and civilization against physical or social threat or chaos (**the auxiliary class:** those averse to disorder and injustice, and prepared to put their lives on the line in the performance of duty: law enforcement, military, etc. Their principle recompense is honor and glory.)

- allegiance to truth and wisdom, and the drive to their advancement (**the guardian class:** aka, “philosopher-kings” – more about these later...)

Remarks:

The motive of the first, surplus wealth-seeking, class is incompatible with what moves the second two classes in their business. Hence, one and the same person cannot truly be dedicated to put their lives on the line, as a member the auxiliary class would, or seek disinterestedly truth and wisdom, as a member of the guardian class would, at the same time they are very competent wealth creators. Philosophers and soldiers make bad businesspersons, and vice versa.

2. One way to get the appetitive class (most of us most of time) to be engaged in their work sufficiently for the possibility of finding enjoyment and fulfillment is to have a stake beyond that of being merely instrumental relevant to it. Worker ownership of an enterprise, for instance. Remuneration is never enough of a competence inspiration.

Again, the third allegiance is *utterly* incompatible with the first: you *cannot* be interested in material wealth *and* be genuinely interested in truth and wisdom. This is a quintessential "conflict of interest." Why? Because there is no essential connection between material excess and the pursuit of truth and wisdom. In fact, it should be obvious that these interests *will* ultimately, if not from the start, collide.[3] History shows this.[4] Plato saw the conflict as irresolvable. Material well-being is justified *only* to the extent it minimally serves the pursuit of truth and wisdom *in those suited to this pursuit*. You cannot escape distraction if you are so destitute or materially miserable that *the uncompromising pursuit* of truth and wisdom becomes impractical. But, any more than the minimum of material resources *for the auxiliary and guardian classes* is every bit as distracting. The pursuit of truth and wisdom *cannot*, on principle, admit of compromise. Lower this standard, and we open the door to the world *just as we find it:* necessarily subject to decay, a world where wisdom is *not* wisdom, truth is *not* truth *unless* these can be turned to materially productive ends. This results in more of the same, more of what we are used to... cycles of envy-driven conflict with brief respites, because wealth collects in pools and *morally stagnates*. Not abiding by the requirement that material wealth keep to its place results, at best, in an unstable situation, subject to the extremes of tyranny or anarchy, and, at worst: ultimate ungraceful social or civilizational decline or annihilation. Materially productive ends are wholly within the province of the first allegiance... They are appropriate only for the appetitive class.

The vocation of pursuing truth and wisdom *above all else* describes what Plato meant by "philosopher king": these individuals are the *only* ones among us suited to making laws and steering the community or state. This is so because they cannot be distracted by anything that isn't the wisest course, all things considered, *and it is their business to consider all things* – a time and resource-consuming luxury the rest of us don't have, for it would distract us from our own proprietary pursuits, the businesses we are supposed to be minding. Philosopher kings will be scarce but the community only needs a few. The qualifications for a philosopher king are the love of truth and wisdom and susceptibility to the felt duty to harness truth and wisdom for the good of all in the community. These are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being properly placed in this class: the *only* ones.

Incidentally, this means that women cannot be excluded from this guardian class. Consistent with the all-importance Plato places on competence and dedication in a leader, nothing else should matter. It is why he was open, as almost no one else was in Athens at the time (certainly not Aristotle), to including women in the "guardian" class of philosopher kings.

Given how extraordinary the idea of including women in the ruling class was in his time and place, one may ask where he might have gotten the idea. Athenian women were largely confined to homes and domestic duties, and were not educated nor allowed any role in community planning or organization. However, this was not generally true in the larger Greek world. In Sparta, for example, women formed elite fighting forces. Often compared to the mythical Amazons, these women soldiers were fiercely dedicated to their role as defenders, accruing opportunities for honor and status commonly attached only to male fighters.

But, likely more influential on Plato's view of women's capabilities was his acquaintance with Aspasia and her closeness to his mentor, Socrates. Aspasia was, by all accounts, a remarkable woman from

3. A clear example: the pursuit of truth and wisdom could lead us to an antinatalist conclusion: to the realization that we should stop procreation in its tracks. There is no way this may be squared with the pursuit of surplus wealth.
4. In this, by the way, Plato reveals his empiricism. Experience *teaches* but, without principle, it cannot *recommend*.

Miletus, a Greek city-state where women could be educated and serve in important governing roles. Pericles, Athen's foremost leader, adored and formed a relationship with her, considering her his closest advisor in running Athens. She hosted intellectual salons in Athens attended by a young Plato, and during much of their lives, she was close to Socrates whom she befriended when both were in their early twenties. Socrates saw her as his equal and formidable sparring partner… Even though Athenian women were excluded from administering outside the home, Plato saw, in the example of Aspasia[5] who first inspired Socrates to take up philosophy, a living counterargument to the exclusion of women from the ruling elite.[6] If competence mattered above all, and a woman, given the opportunity, manifested it, then that woman would be qualified for membership in the ruling class. Plato was consistent: *competence* – intimately tied to dedication and this, in turn, to interestedness – mattered before anything else to eligibility for the ruling class.

The guardian class consists of proven lovers of truth and wisdom. They are this *before* they are anything else. Anything else they are – e.g., physically fit, trained is some specialty associated with the other classes, etc. – is *incidental* to serving that love. Thus, although they are the only ones invested with the power to make law and set the course for other classes, they must see this exertion as a *duty*, not a love or passion. *They rule because they are competent to rule not because they love it.* To rule is a burden, a sacrifice they make to others. They love, again, *only* truth and wisdom. To love truth and wisdom you do not require any of the material or psychological incentives that civilization offers the other two classes. You do not need or desire private property as motivation as the first, "appetitive" class, or glory or honor as the second, "auxiliary" class.

It is also important to note that the philosopher kings are *not* inherently superior or more valuable to the nation state than those in the other two classes as Plato conceives them. Members of each class are fellows, equal partners, in supplying what civilized society needs to flourish. The value of each class lies solely in its contribution to the harmony of the whole. Each class, separate from the others, would be hopelessly useless to the project of civilized harmony. Members of each class are rewarded for their contribution in kind: with what members of each class value and what each class values *defines* their class. To those who value wealth, wealth. To lovers of glory, honor and respect. To the lovers of wisdom… these *need* the least: time to pursue their love. *Wealth and honor would just get in their way.*

Most members of the community, of course, will fall into the first class, fewer in the second, fewer still in the last class. But all are equally essential for sustainable civilization. In an ideal world, each does their part and does not pretend competence in the roles of the others. Moreover, in an ideal world, each would be fulfilled and content *minding their own business*... to the hilt!

Idealistic, head in the clouds?… What do you think?

Actually, the suspicion occurred to Plato, too. Painting an ideal picture is only half the story. He needed to show why none of the forms nation states generally take in the *real* world work to achieve the ideal: a stable harmonious community. And basically there are only three possibilities: rule by one, some, or all. That's too simple, or course. It's never the case that any of these exists in pure form for any appreciable period of time. Nevertheless, reality gestures at the three basic forms often enough that we recognize them when we see them. So Plato turns his attention to non-ideal reality.

5. Suspected by some scholars to be the same woman as "Diotima" in Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*.
6. See "Socrates, Aspasia and philosophy" for more on the significance of Aspasia for Socrates and, by association, for Plato… if not for the history of Western philosophy itself.

He was well aware that no nation state in the Greek world, where there was a rich variety of permutations on governance, came anywhere near what he describes above. (And none since his time either.) Mostly there were simple cases of *autocracy*, rule by one person; or *oligarchy*, rule by a subset of the governed (demarcated by property or wealth ownership, blood line, or social or religious status, etc.); or *democracy*, where political say was granted to most *but never all* of those governed – almost never, for instance, women, slaves, foreigners, or youth.

What all these forms of governance have in common is that *no standards of knowledge and experience* are required to justify the rulers having the authority to rule. What does a knack for wealth-creation have to do with wise rulership skills? Or bloodline? Or religion? Or biological sex?

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In many ways, this discussion is preparatory to our past deep dive into the broken notion of "electoral representative democracy." (See our "Magical thinking about democracy" series of writeups.) Plato may not have had the solution to the problems discussed there – few today would agree with his picture of an ideal society, but he put his finger on an enduring cracks in our thinking. In philosophy, that counts as success. Most thinkers in political philosophy, unfortunately, *at best*, offer reasonable answers to superficial questions.

Many people, I think *most*, as individuals, have trouble specifying precisely what they really want in their lives. Many fear even thinking hard about it. Now imagine how difficult it must be to settle this question for whole societies. *Collectively, what are we willing to sacrifice in return for what?*

Since the so-called "Enlightenment," some notion of democracy has been celebrated as the state-of-the-art in governance. Few question it anymore, as Plato did. Today, it is assumed, that the ruled are in a better to position to know how they should be ruled – or, at least, however they decide they should be ruled, they will be content with their decisions.

In Plato's vision, some *enduring order* was paramount for even the possibility of humans to flourish. And *that humans flourish* with some semblance of dignity was what he thought mattered more than anything else as a goal of government.

It's not clear that we think that anymore. Since at least the 17th Century the doctrine that we as individuals have rights, and that these rights must be safeguarded at all costs because only by having our individual autonomy, our freedom to shape our lives as we wish, can we achieve ultimate fulfillment. Kant, for instance, saw the sacredness of this autonomy as what constituted morality itself. Nothing can be said to be "good" if it compromises the ability we have, alone among known beings, to make rational decisions and be *individually* responsible for them.

Thus, *the beauty of democracy:* it follows from the pedestalization of autonomy that every rationally capable being be given a voice in designing the set of rules that will govern themselves and others equally privileged with rational pretensions. And we must *always* presuppose the rationality of persons on pain of violating the sacredness of even the possibility of their precious rational autonomy should we happen to be wrong. That people *know* what they are doing should always be presupposed. It is immoral to suspect they don't in the absence of clear evidence.

Kant thought we each were members of a "kingdom of ends": he meant by this that we are entitled to rule over ourselves – and *as* entitled to rule over others *as* they are to rule over us. So we must, above all, treat each other with respect, not necessarily with deference, but at least with a recognition that other rational entities are *on a par* with oneself. If we are all rational, surely we must come to a consensus as to how our society should be structured and governed. It is an intrinsic feature of rational beings that their thinking is not arbitrary, that they *can*, with enough effort, perceive a light that illuminates *the* correct way to be and what things to value, that guarantees that, *ultimately,* we all see the same things. Again, assuming we are rational, this is why democracy is supposed to work.

This is why democracy, post-Enlightenment, was seen as workable, at least in theory. And if we don't yet have *working* democracies, surely we will someday, the hope is... Maybe we are just not ready yet, not sufficiently evolved. But if we keep trying and learning from our errors…

I confess I see little reason for such optimism in *historical* time. Plato was writing 2500 years ago, recall. And we may not survive long enough for evolution to take its sweet time.

But granted that some form of democracy is a laudable goal and can be rationally defended, Plato's suspicions aside, is it possible we have been going about it the *wrong* way? I think we may have… partly because Plato was correct in seeing problems we have made little progress in solving: *true separation of powers* and *competence*.

...

At the core of Plato's critique of political systems in the wild, are the *absence* of two things: a *true separation of powers* and *competence*. Assuming the point of government is the creation and preservation of social harmony, in the absence of a true separation of powers and competence – that is, if we don't have *civilized* "checks and balances," there will be *brutal* ones: consider this recent report from Rutgers University on the current political sentiment in the U.S.: "Assassination Culture: How Burning Teslas and Killing Billionaires Became a Meme Aesthetic for Political Violence."

What is *true* separation of powers?[7]

Here is where Thrasymachus comes in. As much as Thrasymachus' view offended Plato, the former was right that in the *real* world, might *is* right and wealth is *not* incidental to might. What must be done to make the *real* world into something closer to the *ideal* one Plato envisioned? Economic power, the impulse to make and hoard wealth, *must be walled off* from political power, from *any* role in the creation or enforcement of law. Laws and their enforcement can have no truck with material wealth.[8] Conversely, those invested in the power to make and enforce law can have no interest in material wealth. Any violation of this *radical separation*, is asking for political and social degradation – in the worst case violence. Empirically, historically, this was evident to Plato. It should by now certainly be to us.

What is competence?

7. See note 1 above.
8. By "wealth" is meant here that which is surplus to the needs of carrying out one's proprietary "business." A hut and a few lentils will suffice the philosopher. A second home in the country or a Tesla can only waste her or his time.

How does it come about? Through the education and training of the *right* persons for a given role. The right persons are those with a natural aptitude for a given role in society and, in essence, these roles are not many. There are *only* three that are distinct: you are cut out to be moved by the acquisition of stuff (most of us); *or* you are inclined to value being in the good graces of others to the extent you will place your life on the line to earn their praise and honor; *or* you are the rare person whose insatiable appetite for understanding to the extent humanly possible, even pushing what is humanly possible, is above all your reason to live. But it falls out of this understanding that it also *burdens* you with a responsibility to chart a wise course for those in the first two groups, that is to say, for all, since without their support and protection, you would not have a reason to exist. This is your business. They must support you in its execution, but you were born to rule *precisely because* wealth and honor mean nothing to you. You rule because it is your *duty* to rule. Realizing this duty is a fall out of the imperative to seek wisdom. The first group may enjoy their material fruits. The second, revel in the respect of others. The last has only an obligation to expend their gifts and efforts for the benefit of all. This is *their business* and it, and it *alone*, is what they should tend to. Thus, they neither need nor want what the others need or want.

Again, this is *not* what "separation of powers" and "competence" means to us, and this is why we fail at achieving anything like social harmony, post-Enlightenment.

We seem to have other priorities. Social harmony, in contrast to Plato, is not the highest communal value on our list. That, or we vastly exaggerate how rational we are capable of being. We enjoy meddling in others' businesses.

Resources

- "Plato's Insane Political Philosophy | The *Republic*," a brief overview of the *Republic* by Unsolicited Advice.
- Rand Paul Decries Congressional 'Cowardice' As He Explains Vote To End Trump's Tariffs Senator Paul reminds Congress of a core idea famous from Montesquieu but derived from Plato's "the separation of powers" doctrine.

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
The Philosophy Club in May 2025
Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle